

THE BOTTOM LINE

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COACHES FOR LAWYERS HELP YOU REACH YOUR GOALS

By Edward Poll



Edward Poll

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IT SEEMS THAT EVERYONE TODAY HAS A COACH. NOT ONE OF THOSE GUYS RUNNING DOWN THE SIDELINES SCREAMING AT THE REFEREE AT A FOOTBALL GAME, NOR THE PERSONAL TRAINER PUSHING YOU TO FEEL THE BURN. I MEAN THE NEW BREED OF COACHES WHO ARE GUIDING BUSINESS EXECUTIVES, SALESPEOPLE, AND YES, EVEN LAWYERS, TO GREATER PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS.

What's Coaching?

In the old days, an attorney generally received professional advice from a more experienced lawyer in the firm; this was "mentoring." Today, there is little mentoring going on because of the heavy emphasis on billable time for both the mentor and the mentee. And, the rise of the professional marketing consultant has provided firms with an outside contractor who can be better at business-development mentoring than even the best rainmaker. Which is where coaching comes in.

Coaching is a professional and personal development technique. It is a form of action-oriented consulting that helps you set and reach your goals. With coaching, operations become more profitable, financing becomes more efficient, and standards of performance are increased. Coaching can be short-term, where the coach helps you create a vision, achieve a specific goal, or complete a particular project; or it can be long-term and on-going.

Coaches do not have all the answers, but they provide an on-going sounding board for your problems, questions, and ideas. Coaching is convenient; there are no time-consuming office visits and little or no stress. Coaching provides instant support and feedback through its regular, weekly, telephone meetings. Location does not matter; you or your practice could be in Merced or Missoula.

Once created, the typical coaching relationship is close and personal, though normally conducted

continued on page 3

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Page 1**

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Page 5**

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entirely by telephone and electronic mail. Contact is usually weekly or as frequently as needed. The interaction between the coach and the person being coached may be as simple as a shoulder to lean on, or as complex as having assignments made by the coach with the expectation that the results of the assignment will be discussed the following week. After an initial session that includes going over the relationship and the options for dealing with the primary concerns, each coaching session usually lasts no more than 30 minutes. A weekly frequency keeps the attorney on track with adjustments as needed. Of course, the coach is also available at other times as required.

Depending on the needs of the attorney and the skill and experience of the coach, the subject of coaching sessions can be narrow or broad. Today, attorneys seem to be most interested in addressing issues such as business development (increased revenue), human relations (staff stability, workload, and compensation), and stress (how to deal with “difficult” clients and leading a “balanced life”). These subjects are important to all lawyers—associates as well as partners, new as well as experienced.

Other reasons to hire a coach:

- * Implement strategic goals
- * Adapt a new lawyer to the firm’s culture
- * Enhance practice development skills
- * Plan for succession of firm leadership
- * Plan for transition after the sale of the practice

How is Coaching Different from Other Services?

Consulting: Consultants solve a specific problem in a business context. They bring topical expertise to a situation and give advice, opinions, and solution proposals. Consultants find the answer to a particular problem but do not transfer a knowledge base to the client. Coaches help clients find answers for themselves. Coaches stay with clients to help them implement changes and meet newly defined goals. Coaches also teach life-skills in the process.

How Does a Lawyer Benefit from Coaching?

- Your practice grows.
- You increase profits.
- You reduce work-related stress.
- You learn how to understand and manage your cash flow.
- You become more focused and produce results more quickly.
- You develop new skills, and these skills translate into more success.
- You gain more control over your practice, your business, and your life.

Mentoring: Mentors have history, experience, and wisdom on their side. A mentor attempts to transfer their wealth of knowledge to the mentee. A coach may not have that personal experience but can draw the information and insights out of the client’s own experience and creativity, and then teach the client how to continue on that path of self-discovery and creative expression. Sometimes, a particular coach may be chosen because of his or her suitability as a mentor.

Therapy: Therapists work with individuals to address the past and its impact on the present. Therapists deal with people who are in crisis or are continually undermined by unresolved issues from their past. The coach recognizes the client as a whole, healthy, and creative human being. The coach starts from the “here and now” and helps the client find functional and effective ways to move forward to accomplish goals and improve his or her life.

Does Coaching Really Work?

A couple of personal examples from a coach’s point of view tell the story. An engagement with a successful attorney in Atlanta, Georgia, was created to hone and improve his practice-development practices. During one phone meeting I detected stress in his voice and

continued on page 4

asked what his concern was. "I have so much business that I'm worried about failing to do something I should do," he explained. We then discussed his procedures for dealing with open files, and I made several recommendations including the development of a project management system that I had created. He was dubious at first but a week later said, "The system works! I had the best night's rest in a long time, and my stress level has gone way down."

Another coaching client had an issue with a client who did not want to pay for services rendered. The lawyer had achieved an outstanding result and had even reduced his fee, but his client failed to appreciate the value of his service. I suggested that the lawyer prepare a letter that outlined the case, the settlement, and his advice. I further suggested that the letter conclude with the statement that the proceeds of settlement were now available for immediate distribution when the client approved and signed the "settlement sheet." We wanted the client's signature authorizing both payment to him and to the attorney for the attorney's fee. Because of this proactive approach, the attorney reported that he was able to deal effectively with his client, and he earned an additional \$85,000 as a result of the advice. This coaching session was brief, but its value to the attorney was huge, even more important than just the added revenue. Because of my background as a practicing lawyer, I was able to recommend language that forestalled the filing of a complaint by the client.

The Bottom Line on Coaching

Top athletes in every sport have personal coaches. Successful business executives and professionals have coaches. Why shouldn't lawyers also have coaches? Like the shoemaker whose children go without shoes, lawyers frequently do not take care of their own needs. Having a coach helps focus your energies on those tasks that will continue to increase revenues. The coach is someone who not only gives you advice on how to achieve your goals, but to whom you are accountable and to whom you make a commitment to perform the tasks you agree are necessary.

It is much easier to achieve your goals with someone at your side, supporting, advising, and pushing you along. You become more focused and produce better results. You develop new skills, and these skills translate into more success. You gain more control over your practice, your business, and your life.

Edward Poll, J.D., M.B.A., C.M.C., is a certified management consultant and coach in Los Angeles who advises attorneys and law firms on how to deliver their services more profitably. He is the author of "Attorney & Law Firm Guide to The Business of Law: Planning & Operating for Survival & Growth," (2nd Ed., 2002) published by the American Bar Association, and "Secrets of the Business of Law: Successful Practices for Increasing Your Profits." He is also the creator of "Law Practice Management Review: The Audio Magazine for Busy Attorneys." To make suggestions or comments about this article, call (800) 837-5880 or send an e-mail to edpoll@lawbiz.com. You can also order a free e-zine or visit Ed on the web at www.lawbiz.com.



State Bar of California
Law Practice Management
& Technology Section
180 Howard Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
www.calbar.org/lpmt

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QUESTIONS: COACHES FOR LAWYERS

1. Today, lawyers use "coaches" to help achieve greater professional success.

True False

2. Lawyers join with business executives and salespeople in using these types of coaches to help achieve greater success.

True False

3. In the past, attorneys often received professional advice from a more experienced lawyer in their firms.

True False

4. Professional advice received from a more experienced lawyer is often referred to as "downloading."

True False

5. Today, there is increased mentoring of inexperienced lawyers by experienced lawyers.

True False

6. Professional marketing consultants, operating as outside contractors, can be better at business-development mentoring than even the best in-house rainmaker.

True False

7. "Coaching" is a developmental technique, a form of action-oriented consulting that helps you set and reach your professional and personal goals.

True False

8. Coaching is a short-term technique only; the goal is achieving immediate results.

True False

9. "Coaching" is essentially the same as consulting or mentoring.

True False

10. Coaches can provide an on-going sounding board for your issues, questions, and ideas.

True False

11. Coaching should only be done on a face-to-face basis, therefore the location of your practice matters.

True False

12. Once created, the typical coaching relationship is close and personal.

True False

13. Contact with a coach should be flexible.

True False

14. The interaction between the coach and the person being coached may be simple or complex.

True False

15. A typical coaching session typically lasts for 1-2 hours.

True False

16. Your initial session with a coach should focus only on the parameters of your professional relationship with that coach.

True False

17. Contacting a coach on a weekly basis helps keeps the lawyer being coached on track with adjustments as needed.

True False

18. Generally, the subject of coaching sessions will be narrow and extremely focused.

True False

19. Today, attorneys are interested in addressing issues such as business development, human relations and stress.

True False

20. Coaches can be helpful in (a) implementing strategic goals, (b) enhancing practice development skills, and (c) planning for leadership succession.

True False

